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AUTHOR	Mayfield, Tina; Poulter, Steve
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ABSTRACT

Theoretically, reading and writing skills should be taught beginning in elementary school. As early as kindergarten teachers should be emphasizing reading and writing, teaching children how to read using phonics, and how to write things as simple as one-line sentences. This paper discusses the things that teachers can do to make sure that all eighth graders can read and write. The paper states that the first step is to give a standardized test to all eighth graders during the first weeks of school so that they can be placed in an English class suitable to their level. It notes that many children may not have parents who read to them when they were young, or because of lack of time or because of lack of education. The paper clarifies what is meant by "teaching reading" and "teaching writing." It proposes that all teachers and schools, elementary through high school, rearrange their teaching schedules so English is given 10-15 minutes more per day. It suggests that, with this extra time for English, students will go on to high school with the proper skills to pass English and their other classes without a struggle to read the textbook or write a basic assignment. The paper argues that, when students make it to high school without the proper skills to read and write correctly, it is the high school teachers' job to teach these students to read and write, not just to pass them on because they do not want to "mess with them." It concludes that the notion that teaching reading and writing correctly is for elementary teachers, rather than teachers at any level, may be why so many students make it to high school without these skills. (NKA)

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Tina Mayfield

Steve Poulter

English 4363

July 8, 2002

On the Road to Success: Assuring Students Can Read and Write by the Eighth Grade

Students should not enter high school until they possess the knowledge and skills to read and write on an eighth grade level. Students should be able to take a subject and write a one-paragraph essay about it, using correct grammar and punctuation. They should know exactly how to write an opening statement and a closing statement. All students should be taught these skills and be in possession of them before entering high school. Junior high teachers, as well as elementary teachers, should teach students the correct methods of reading and writing so there are no long-term problems.

Theoretically, reading and writing skills should be taught beginning in elementary school. Teachers should be emphasizing reading and writing as early as kindergarten. They should teach children how to read using phonics, and how to write things as simple as one-line sentences. As the children go through junior high, teachers should make them read classics (on their level), and then make them write a short essay on it. In theory, if students can read and write at this level, they will succeed when they are in high school. Teachers should begin this process early because it will allow students to gain the knowledge they need and build on this knowledge for the rest of their life.

The first step in insuring eighth graders can read and write is to give a standardized test to all eighth graders during the first or second week of school. After the students' scores are

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figured, they can be placed in an English class that is suitable to their level. If students are only at a fifth grade level, they should be placed in a class with other students on the same level, not with students testing on an eighth grade level. Next, these students should be given extra attention so that, by the end of the year, they can pass the same test. When they pass the test, only then should students be allowed to go on to high school.

When I began working at a junior high school three years ago, I never realized how many seventh and eighth grade students could not read or write. I work in the music department and we have many students who have to follow the music teacher because they cannot read the words on a piece of music.

One day, while observing an eighth grade music class, I saw Teondre give the teacher back a piece of music right after she handed it out. I watched him during class and noticed he was "reading lips" the entire hour. I spoke with the teacher afterwards, and she informed me that this eighth grader could not read. I didn't understand how a child made it all the way to eighth grade and could not read.

Teachers must teach students to correctly read and write beginning in elementary school and not stop until these students have graduated high school. The learning must not stop!

I believe that the issue of teaching students to read and write exists for all teachers and students in elementary, junior high, and high school. If I were to ask eighth grade English teachers whether or not they felt the majority of their students could read and write on an eighth grade level, their answer would be "yes." But this is not all students. This issue is about every student and every teacher in every class in every school. In her biography, Laura, America's First Lady, First Mother, Laura Bush states in a press release, "We all have a duty to call attention to the science and seriousness of early childhood cognitive development. The years

from the crib to the classroom represent a period of intense language and cognitive growth. Armed with the right information, we can make sure every child learns to read and reads to learn" (160).

This issue may have started with parents. If parents didn't take the time to read to their children when they were young, there was probably no interest in learning to read. Also, if parents didn't help their children learn how to write the ABCs and spell their names, there was probably no interest in learning how to write. Parents cannot solely rely on teachers to teach their children to read and write; they need to begin this process at home. We only have to pick up any magazine or newspaper to see that this is a nationwide problem. According to the U.S. Department of Education, a reading assessment of 13-year-olds conducted in 1999 concluded that 21% tested below the 50th percentile. This study also concluded that the average reading score for 13-year-olds whose parents did not graduate from high schools was 238 out of a possible 500.

The cause for this problem may be the lack of education in some parents. Common sense tells us that parents should begin teaching their children at home before they ever reach school age. But convincing parents, educated or not, that this should happen isn't always easy. Uneducated parents do not always know that they should be teaching their children these skills before they enter school. The same study as above by the U.S. Department of Education also concluded that the average reading score for 13-year-olds whose parents did not graduate from high schools was 238 out of a possible 500. If parents have taught their children the basics of reading and writing, when their children are tested, they should be able to pass the tests without any problems. If parents have not prepared their children properly for school, there is a good chance these children will not be able to pass the tests. According to the National Education

Association, "Parents who read to their children before they enter school give their children a boost toward reading success."

Allowing parents to be surveyed and children to be tested before entering school allows them to be placed in the proper level to begin their learning experience. As I stated before, if students enter kindergarten and cannot read a single word or write their name, they should not be placed in the same class as other students who can already read and write. This will hinder the advanced students' learning process because the teacher will be spending extra time with the slower students.

It is important for parents to know what they should teach their children before they enter school. It is also important for teachers to know that all children can't read and write when they enter school, even though they should be able to. Teaching students the skills and knowledge needed to read and write in elementary school will help them stay in school and actually have an interest in school. "Teachers who understand how children learn to read are the most effective teachers of reading" (NEA). Parents and teachers need to realize that teaching students properly when they are very young will affect them the rest of their lives. A study by the National Center for Education Statistics states, "In October 2000, 3.8 million young adults were not enrolled in a high school program and had not completed high school." If students cannot read and write, they will probably drop out of school (out of a lack of interest) and end up in the welfare system, but, if students can read and write, they have the ability to go to college, and have a good career.

I want to clarify what I mean by "teaching reading" and "writing." The term "teaching reading" is familiar to all English teachers, as well as other educators and parents. According to the California Department of Education, the term "teaching reading" means English teachers should teach students phonemic awareness; letter names and shapes; systematic, explicit phonics;

spelling; vocabulary development; comprehension and higher-order thinking; and use appropriate instructional materials.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines "writing" as "expression of thoughts or ideas in written words" (646). According to the Encarta World English Dictionary, the term "writing" is associated with the German word "write," or "*reissen*," which means "to tear." "The earliest form of writing involved cutting marks on hard materials such as stone and wood and the same word was carried over when the technique of writing moved on to pen and ink."

The first recorded use of the word in English occurred *circa* 1386, when Chaucer used it in "The Canterbury Tales, The Man of Law's Portrait." He wrote, "Ther koude no wight pynchen at his writyng," meaning that no person could find fault with his writing (Librarius). He is referring to "writing" as one of his "compositions." In this paper, when I refer to "writing," I am referring to the same thing as Chaucer, the "expression of thoughts or ideas in written words," which would be the same as "compositions."

So "teaching reading," as I will be using this term throughout this essay, is a kind of art that focuses on what teachers need to do to teach students to read correctly. It also refers to The term "writing," focuses on essays being written correctly. In this essay, I consider "writing" to be a major factor in passing the eighth grade. Students should know how to compose a short essay, including the introduction, body, and conclusion.

As I stated above, the first step in insuring eighth graders can read and write is to give a standardized test to all eighth graders during the first or second week of school. If schools are not testing students for these skills, they should start. The test should include all elements of reading and writing such as correct grammar, basic punctuation, spelling, and reading comprehension. After the tests are graded, students should be placed in the appropriate English

class according to their scores. There should be two or three different levels of English classes, depending on the size of the school. One for students which score a failing grade, one for students which score an average grade, and one for students which score above average or a high grade. All English teachers should be able to teach all three levels. That way, there would not be a shortage of below level and above level classes. This is an easy plan that any school could implement.

Next, students scoring a failing grade should be given extra attention so that, by the end of the year, they can pass the same test they took at the beginning of the year. The students in this level (failing grade) need extra attention that they probably would not get in an upper level English class. They need a teacher who understands they need extra attention and help with such things as spelling, punctuation, and correct grammar. These teachers might begin the year teaching these students on a fifth or sixth grade level, then progress faster than the normal English class to "catch the students up" to the eighth grade level. I'm not saying a teacher can teach all students correct English, but with homework and class involvement, I believe the majority of these students could pass the English test at the end of the school year.

Teachers must teach students to correctly read and write, beginning in elementary school, and not stop until these students have graduated high school. In order to put an emphasis on teaching students to correctly read and write we will have to begin with how English is taught in elementary school. Teachers need to spend more time teaching reading and writing. To accomplish this, I propose that all teachers and schools, elementary through high school, rearrange their teaching schedules so English is given 10-15 minutes more per day. That equals an hour or so more per week and, if teachers use their time wisely, they can teach many things in that extra hour a week.

This will require either every class being longer or English for all students being the first, second, or third hour of the day. Most students are in "elective" classes such as music, art, band, and gym. Schools could take five minutes away from each of these "elective" classes and give them to the English classes. Also, students who score in the "high" category on their tests could take a shorter or normal English class at a different time in the day.

Some results of these changes will be students that can actually read and write correctly. I believe students will actually see an improvement in their test scores. Students will go onto high school with the proper skills to pass English and their other classes without a struggle to read the textbook or write a basic assignment.

Some teachers argue that students should be "passed on" to high school when they reach a certain age whether or not they can read or write. When students reach sixteen years of age, they are sent from middle school to high school, whether it is in the beginning of a school year or the last month of a school year. It does not matter what their grades are, whether they are passing any classes, or can read and write. They are automatically sent to high school. So, now we have sixteen-year-old students who are "thrown" into high school courses and cannot read or write. These students should be required to take summer classes or extra classes in place of elective classes during the school year to make up for their deficiency. Even if they are "passed on," schools should place these students in classes appropriate for their reading and writing levels. These students should not be placed in a ninth grade English class in the middle of what was their eighth grade year. They are not sixteen years old and in eighth grade for being smart students. These students need more help and attention than the average eighth grader and they should be given that attention.

Some high school teachers may argue that it is not their job to teach students to read and write; they should already know how. The ideal teaching environment would be all students reading and writing correctly. However, that is not the case. As I stated above, some students make it to high school without the proper skills to read and write correctly. When this happens, it is the high school teachers' job to teach these students to read and write, not just to pass them on because they don't want to "mess with them." There needs to be specialized classes in high school for students who cannot pass a basic reading and writing exam. Teachers of these classes need to be taught how to deal with these students and accelerate their learning experience so they can "catch up" with the other students in their grade level. No teacher is exempt from teaching students to read and write.

Another argument from teachers is that too much emphasis is placed on reading and writing and not on all subjects. I agree that students should be learning everything from math to science to history, but if they can't read or write, how will they be able to study? Learning to read and write is the basis for everything in school and life in general. If students can't read a biology or history textbook, how will they pass a test? If students can't write, how will they answer essay questions? Teachers need to realize that the emphasis placed on English is essential for students in any class.

By making the claim that teachers should teach reading and writing skills beginning in elementary school through high school, I am assuming that teachers will be qualified to teach on any English level, including teaching students that are lacking correct English skills.

I am also assuming that insuring eighth graders can read and write before entering high school is a skill that schools want their students to possess. I base this statement solely on what I have seen working in a junior high school. Students can make it all the way to the eighth grade

without being able to read and are placed in learning disability classes. These students need to be taught before they leave the eighth grade the proper reading and writing skills. Why "pass on" students if they can't pass junior high classes to high school? Do teachers actually think they will be able to pass high school classes without being able to read and write? In the news, there have been too many athletes, in particular, who have graduated from high school without being able to read and write. They get passing grades in their classes because they play football or basketball. This needs to stop! If a teacher of any subject in the tenth grade has students who cannot read or write, that teacher needs to report the students to a counselor and they need to be placed in the proper classes to learn these skills. It doesn't matter what grade students are in. If they are old enough to read and write, they should be taught continuously in school.

Students seem to learn reading and writing skills better when they are continuously taught throughout school and when they are taught outside of school. For example, students who have teachers who push them to do their homework and push class participation will more likely succeed in English and other classes. Also, if parents read to young students and encourage older students to read or join a library summer reading program, these students tend not to lose the skills they have acquired during the school year.

In many cases, the "bookworms," or students who seem to always be reading a book, are the students who get the better grades. I know of one student at the school where I work who always has a book in his hand. He is a straight-A student. Not every student who likes to read is a straight-A student, but knowing how to read and write is the best skill a student can learn.

Ignoring the problem of correct reading and writing skills is like ignoring a leaky faucet, it only gets worse until we fix it. We learn to read and write by going to class and being taught by our teachers the proper skills needed to read and write. Neither of these skills, reading and

writing, comes to us naturally. They are all acquired skills, which mean we have to be correctly taught how to do them.

The notion that teaching reading and writing correctly is for elementary teachers, rather than teachers at any level, may be why so many students make it to high school without these skills. Teachers must realize that being a teacher means to teach and assist students with any subject they need help with. If a student can't read or write in junior high school, then parents and teachers must do everything possible to get these students in classes that will teach them to read and write. If, however, we do nothing about it, these students will probably go on to high school and be placed in learning disability classes instead of the classes they need to be placed in. Teachers and parents need to do everything possible for their students and children and help them get a great education. Perhaps then, schools wouldn't have so many students "dropping-out" or not graduating high school. As Laura Bush so powerfully stated, "Each of us has a duty to help our children achieve their full potential. By working together, we can shape the destiny of America's children with our hands and hearts" (161).

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